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Japan An inspiration in retailing

Japanese culture in all forms from art, film and design has always been a rich source of inspiration for designers, myself included.

The contemporary architectural visions of Todao Ando and Arata Isozaki appear to bridge an almost mystical sensitivity with daring and structural designs seemingly unimaginable elsewhere.

Likewise fashion designers Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons have over the past twenty five years reinterpreted what we think of as 'clothes' into some higher art form.

Japan is a destination therefore that I have always wanted to visit. A recent 7 day retail study tour of Tokyo with particular focus on our area of expertise, convenience and food retailing was a dream come true.

The trip organized by ACS (Association of Convenience Stores) SRCG and Kerry Foods was for UK retail leaders which included Spar, Costcutter, BP retail, Nisa and Cumberland Farms from the United States amongst others. The visits were arranged with the help of leading Japanese convenience retailers Seven Eleven (13,750 stores in Japan), Circle K Sunkus (6,275) and Family Mart (8,250).

Each of the Tokyo retailer hosts is currently enjoying significant business growth particularly in lunch and dinner food. In the February earthquake areas, temporary and mobile stores are heavily shopped providing convenience and necessities as the clear up continues.

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The study tour superbly organized by Scott Annan of retail strategy consultants SRCG and his charming wife Ragini, included business overviews from the retailers, store visits, a new food factory, a distribution centre and the world famous department stores Obento 'food to go' halls.

In addition to studying convenience and food retail a visit to Aoyama the upmarket fashion district to see flagship stores of the likes of Prada, Issey Miyake, Comme des Garçon, Cartier and others was a highlight of the tour for me; retail design as 'high art'.

Life of convenience

The proliferation and growth of high quality convenience stores in Japan is being fuelled by an unusual demographic trend. Young Japanese professionals, male and female are very aspirational and career orientated. This group are staying in work longer and staying single, the result being a falling population and relative decline of young families. Equally with increase in healthy lifestyles, the Japanese are living longer, for both of these growing segments convenience retail is the perfect solution to daily food and grocery requirements. The young professionals being time poor and the elderly not in need of such large shopping baskets.

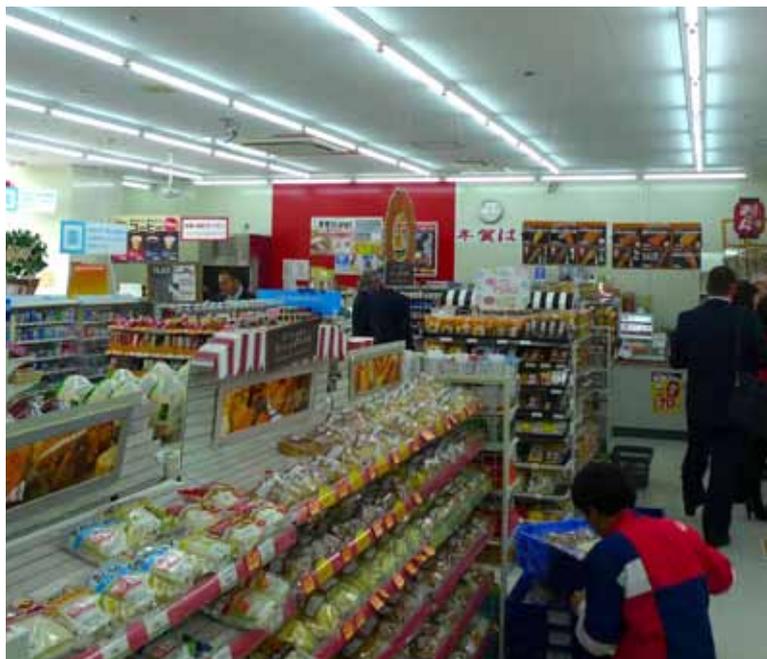
The lunch and dinner offers are fresh, good quality and affordably priced versus daily restaurants which are losing market share.

The first and most distinctive characteristic of these stores is the incredible product range. Literally thousands of SKUs with amazing product depth in specific categories. Product categories that would be unfamiliar to a UK shopper such as herbal energy drinks aimed at various customer segments, kids included, fantastic stationery ranges, even shirts and umbrellas.

In fact the whole focus of the store environment (Circle K, Seven 11, Family Mart and Lawsons) is product range and fairly no-nonsense product presentation.



Every aspect of convenience is catered for including shirts to go



What makes up for this somewhat cold interior environment is the beautiful product packaging and focus on product range particularly fresh.

Interior design in these stores is lets say 'utilitarian' and somewhat cold in most cases. Stripped fluorescent lighting and vinyl floors combined with 1970s style visual merchandising is the norm.

Lifestyle branding and theatrical or themed branded interiors as we know them have not reached the mainstream convenience segment in Japan as far as I saw from our store visits.

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Depth of range is a notable feature, here herbal tea drinks of many varieties and flavours.



Heated shelves offer customers a warm tea or coffee to go.



Rich and colourful product packaging.



Hot dumplings to go, a healthier fast food option.



Wide range of lunch options with the Bento box part of the Japanese staple.

Ready made 'food to go' however is amazingly sophisticated with the lunchtime bento box the mainstay of Japanese office workers. Each season new bento menus are introduced and the quality is extremely high. Shelf life on fresh food products is labelled indicating to a small army of shop assistants products that need to be replenished.

Another wonderful feature of the store experience is the customer service from staff who are always courteous and happy.



Products are ordered three times daily and delivered to stores during working hours which must be a real challenge in central city locations. Staff use a wireless PDA with store planograms that indicate every SKU and which need to be replenished, orders are emailed directly to the central distribution centre.

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Famima has a sophisticated yet youthful personality communicated through the environment, language and product range. Multiple till points allow fast turnaround at busy breakfast and lunchtimes. At our lunchtime visit the store was extremely busy.

Internally lit pictogram/signage features create point of interest and visual style.



In depth product ranges and excellent visual merchandising.



The exception to the somewhat bland interior design of the mainstream convenience stores mentioned is the Family Mart owned Famima convenience brand that is focused on higher income segment and located in upmarket office buildings. Famima features the best in retail branding and sophisticated yet friendly interior design.

The merchandising system and lighting is particularly notable, the low height allowing views across the store and featuring a yellow internally illuminated band which somehow ties the store together and creates a soft light. Materials are of the highest quality and the dark timber floor adds a warmth and quality to the interior design.

High quality merchandising system with glass shelves allows effective product lighting.



Simplicity and beauty combined.



Bento boxes exquisitely presented in this railway station kiosk.

Retail as art

Food retailing outside of convenience generally is of an amazingly high standard, exemplified in no better place than the railway terminus food courts, also sharing in this convenient food growth trend. Their pricing and quality is higher than convenience stores and they offer immense choice from hundreds of competing concessions. The sights, sounds and smells are awesome!

We had the pleasure of visiting Toyko Central Railway Station that has over 400 food outlets. The standard of presentation and design of the outlets is breathtaking.

One of the highlights of the retail experience in Tokyo is the product presentation. Everyday artefacts and goods are elevated to objects of beauty by minute attention to packaging, presentation and lighting.



Backlit coloured Sake bottles become more than a simple beverage, again lighting and packaging is stunning.



Visual merchandising using the traditional bulk product packaging and clever lighting at this specialist Sake shop window display.



Sumptuous product packaging.

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Colour is everywhere in both packaging and food products, here carefully colour co-ordinated macaroons and giant fruit.



Products are also designed to look 'perfect'. Fruit in this store is presented as a real delicacy, fruits displayed here are grown to mammoth proportions with apples and pears the size of melons. Each piece is displayed proudly as an object of desire. Prices match the expectation with a very large apple costing the equivalent of £30.

This somewhat obsessive attitude to retail is extended to many aspects of Japanese life. Perfectly preened pets are the must have accessory for many cool Tokyo residents perhaps those professionals with no time for a family? Green Dog is a chain of dog parlours with a range of intriguing services as can be seen from the signage below that cater for self respecting dog lovers.



Hi-tech doggy clipping stations. Designer doggy duffel coats with slippers and gourmet kitten food.



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Retail as high art

If obsession is a trademark of Japanese consumerism, no better example can be found than in the flagship fashion stores of Aoyama. Like all other aspects of retailing, fashion and personal styling is an absolute passion for the Tokyo elite. As a homage to this desire for the ultimate in contemporary apparel, many of the elite international brands as well as the best of homegrown labels have chosen this district of Tokyo to locate their cathedrals of fashion.

The Prada flagship store by Swiss architects Herzog and De Meuron is the ultimate blend of beauty in the built environment and retail as 'high art'. The lattice structure has been designed to withstand strong earth tremors that characterise the fragile Japanese existence on a major geographical fault line. Convex, concave and flat diamond shaped glass lenses create a wondrous exterior skin that allows light to permeate the building day and night.



The store entrance is cut into the lattice structure. The interior is a smooth cream environment reminiscent of the inside a kid skin jewellery box. The glazed lenses allows beautifully distorted views back out to the Tokyo skyline. At night the interior becomes the focus from the outside. The building appears as some giant glass lantern full of jewels.

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Not quite as esoteric as Prada but with no less fanatical following, Bathing Ape is the flagship store for this Japanese streetwear brand. The store interior design resembles an extruded aluminium American diner inserted into a contemporary concrete minimalist block.

The ape motif is used as a decorative feature on all surfaces of the garments and interior finishes, the ultimate in retail branding.



The Bathing Ape store entrance. Interior ceiling treatment with the distinctive motif.

Fine urban fabric

If retail design across the board from convenience food and fashion has reached a high point in Tokyo, then the urban fabric that glues all of these experiences together cannot be forgotten. That obsessive attention to detail and ability to deliver high quality is everywhere within the urban environment from street signage to pavements and drain covers.

There appears to be a respect and quiet dignity amongst the city dwellers that pervades the atmosphere. Citizens are polite respectful and courteous in virtually every encounter from the taxi driver to waiter or shop assistant.

A visit to Tokyo is a dream fulfilled, however it has left a taste to visit again and explore some more. As a designer Tokyo is a must, but on so many levels we can learn from the experience of a densely populated and built urban environment that manages to combine the best aspects of city life.



An attention to detail extends to decorative drain covers. Colourful and friendly Tokyo citizens.



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Circle is a brand and design consultancy that brings a fresh perspective to brands.

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